

EPA to warn residents about tainted spring

Tests continue in Arkansas after chemical found in water

By Mike Penprase

Our Tri-Lakes Bureau

OMAHA, Ark. — People living near the defunct Arkwood Inc. wood treatment plant will be warned to stay away from a nearby spring branch contaminated with pentachlorophenol, a spokeswoman with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said Thursday.

That warning will be in the form of signs posted along the unnamed branch that flows into a stream system leading to Table Rock Lake, said Ellen Greeney, Superfund community relations coordinator with the EPA's Dallas regional office.

The agency is having signs printed that will alert residents to be wary of the spring branch, she said. "This one," she said, "is going to say the water is not suitable for use of any kind."

The main concern is that children or animals might come into contact with the water, she said.

Pentachlorophenol, also known as "penta," is used as a wood preservative. In recent years, it has been described by the EPA as a suspected cancer-causing chemical.

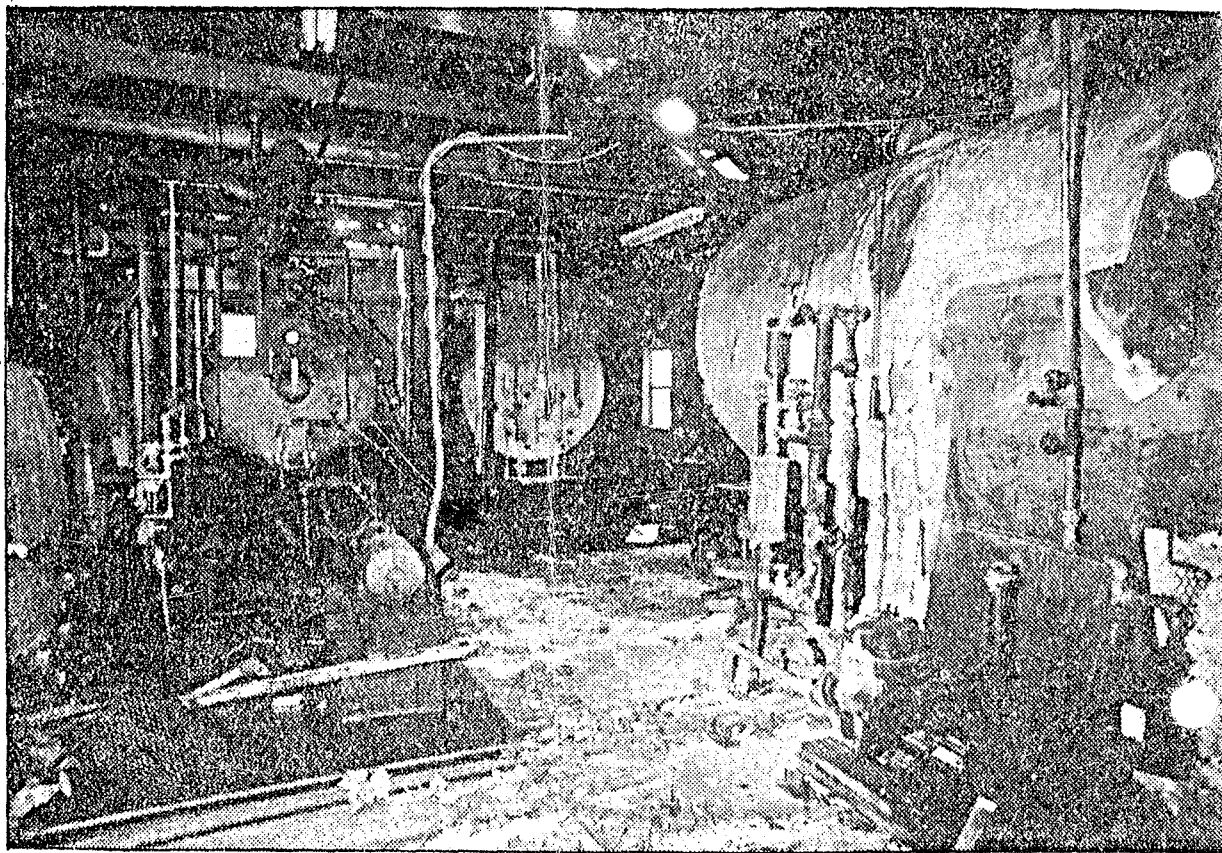
Investigators working for the EPA have found that pentachlorophenol levels in the branch running from a spring near the Arkwood plant exceed permitted limits, Greeney said.

She did not have the Arkwood file available during a telephone interview and did not recall what pentachlorophenol levels had been reported.

EPA investigators learned that pentachlorophenol and creosote were dumped into a cave on the Arkwood property when the plant was in operation, starting in 1960, Greeney said. The contaminated spring is about 100 yards west of the Arkwood site, and it is suspected that water flows from the cave system into the spring.

The plant site, which is owned by Harrison resident Hallie Ormond, was leased by Mass Merchandisers of Harrison from 1974 until the plant was closed in 1984. It is west of U.S. Highway 65 on the south edge of Omaha.

In recent months, most of the buildings on the plant site



Staff photo/Mike Penprase

The federal Environmental Protection Agency plans to warn people to stay away from a spring branch contaminated with pentachlorophenol

from the former Arkwood Inc. plant near Omaha, Ark. The plant and its equipment, like that pictured here, has been dismantled.

have been dismantled and the equipment removed.

Mass Merchandisers entered into an administrative agreement with the EPA to pay for testing and cleanup, Greeney said.

An extensive testing program that will include drilling

for soil samples and testing water in Walnut Creek, into which the branch flows, will start soon, Greeney said.

"If they find something in Walnut Creek, they'll keep

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Christopher Gonnerman
Christopher Gonnerman, 18, LaPlata, Md., died Monday after a long illness. He is the grandson of Dr. Emory and Nora Gonnerman, formerly of Springfield. Survivors include his parents, Drs. A. and Madelyn Gonnerman; two brothers, Dr. Gordon and Dr. John; two sisters, Dr. Mary and Dr. Anne; and Dr. John's wife, Dr. Mary.

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going to determine the imaginary line where it (contamination) stops," she said.

It's unlikely chemicals got far down the unnamed branch into Walnut or Cricket creeks or into Table Rock Lake, Greeney said.

"We'll be surprised if there's anything to be concerned about down there," she said.

One woman living near the Arkwood plant site said Thursday she remains concerned.

Rose Birmingham, who lives on the hill directly above the suspect spring, said she and her two children became ill after drinking water from two wells.

A trip to a Little Rock hospital for treatment of symptoms—including vomiting, headaches and rashes—indicated chemicals were to blame, Birmingham said.

Although Mass Merchandisers paid for a new 850-foot-deep well, Birmingham said she remains unconvinced the well will remain untainted.

"Eight hundred fifty feet, and we're still scared," she said.

And Greeney said that cleaning up the site could be complicated. Mass Merchandisers will need Ormond's permission to remove contaminated material.

"That can or cannot be an easy situation," she said. "We'll just have to see."

An agreement also could be hard to reach because Mass Merchandisers, Ormond and son-in-law C.C. "Bud" Grisham are being sued by the Arkansas Pollution Control of Ecology Department, Greeney said.

Meanwhile, Greeney said, the EPA will press for efforts

to secure the plant site.

She said she was surprised to learn that turkey shoots and other activities were held on the plant site after it was placed on the Superfund list in 1985.

The unfenced plant site remained easily accessible on Thursday afternoon. A handwritten sign stating "Not Responsible For Accidents" attached to a gatepost was the only warning sign on the site.

An EPA "fact sheet" given to local residents indicates that between 6,000 and 7,000 pounds of creosote and pentachlorophenol were dumped in the nearby cave each year for more than a decade.

Waste oils also were placed in a ditch running along adjoining Missouri Pacific railroad tracks and were spread on the storage yard to control dust, the EPA document indicates.

Information about pentachlorophenol levels and plans for more extensive testing will be described Jan. 12 when Greeney and an EPA project engineer meet with the Omaha School Board.

The meeting was planned for next Monday, but a scheduling conflict prompted the decision to delay the meeting, Greeney said.

Omaha School Superintendent Dr. Bill Lewis said school board members asked for the meeting to get an update on what the EPA plans to do at the site.

There is no concern about contaminated water reaching the school because the school gets its water from the uncontaminated city water system, Lewis said.

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